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CHAPTER II

000 WITHIN two weeks I was Mudeer, or 'Master' of the Fort, my predecessor, Bob Allison, having handed over to the satisfaction of us both and of the Regional Director. I had reason to remember the day before his departure. There were two parties; one at the Fort, given to R.A.F. and American friends, and the other at the sheikh's palace. We attended the latter first, assembling at the Political Officer's residence early in the evening for a drink and a smoke, comforts which we should have to forgo whilst under the sheikh's roof.

Captain Bird occupied a low-built, Moorish type of building on the shore of Sharjah creek. It had a pleasant trellised veranda running the full length of the house, and in the hot weather it was a great relief to sit there and enjoy the sea breezes. The only disadvantage was that one got the smells as well, the town being a short distance from the house. An enclosed courtyard, guarded by an immense door of decorated sandalwood, before which sat an Arab sentry, divided the residence into two parts; on the left was the residential and domestic quarter, whilst on the right were the Government offices.

Bird once told me that this arrangement, although extremely convenient at times, had the disadvantage of putting him at the mercy of clerks and official callers who pestered him long after the defined hours. Not that he was the type of man who sought to avoid work; but he was studying hard to acquire a mastery of the Arab language and script, and sacrificed most of his leisure to that end. With his only illuminant an Aladdin lamp, and the small, fanless room buzzing with flies and mosquitoes, he must have possessed exceptional patience to sit there, night after night, translating the caligraphic mysteries of the Koran. Occasionally he would drive over to the Fort in an old Chrysler to take dinner with us, but these visits, unfortunately for us, were all too rare.

576 It is considered bad manners to call on a Mohammedan between
782 five and seven o'clock in the evening, because during this time, 'at the hour of sunset', as it is called, the faithful are called to prayer.

Occasionally we would hear the shrill voice of the *Muezzin* as he chanted from the mosque tower, and those who were caught napping in the streets or desert would fall on their knees straight away and prostrate themselves to the ground. The Arab method of prayer is both complicated and physically uncomfortable. The incantation is said standing, but after each prayer the worshipper, always facing the east, will fall on his knees, touching the ground several times with his forehead. The guards in the Fort had the habit of performing their religious rites and exercises in front of my office door and, as I did not like to disturb them at such times, the practice proved a trifle inconvenient.

At seven-thirty Bird drove Allison and myself to the sheikh's palace, which was a rather unimposing residence about a quarter of a mile away. The real palace, or fort, from which the royal flag fluttered from a ruined tower, was only a few yards away, but it was seldom used as a residence. Originally built by the Portuguese when they invaded the Persian Gulf in the seventeenth century, it had been renovated and partially rebuilt in desert style by successive sheikhs, but the present ruler believed in retrenchment rather than expenditure. He had no intention of spending his money on the upkeep of so pretentious a relic, which was imposing in a ruinous way from the outside, but within shabby and dilapidated in the extreme. In cool weather he would sit with his entourage on a bench outside the great gateway, but the interior was used only by his sons as a kind of gigantic playroom, or by some of his retinue for indulging in shady deals or illegal hashish smoking.

The main residence, to which we were now driving, was a two-storeyed house with a fretted balcony, Moorish windows and a heavily studded door of plain tulip wood. A high mud wall rose up to the windows on one side, and behind this lay the harem. We were met on the steps by the sheikh, Sultan bin Saqr, his three sons, and about a dozen bearded gentlemen with gilded swords and rifles. They formed the sheikh's retinue, and were secretaries, ministers, advisers of some sort and, generally speaking, 'hangers-on', it being a custom of that country for members of the court to attach themselves to the ruler and live at his expense. The cost of maintaining such an entourage and household was about a thousand rupees a day, I was informed; that is, in English money at the present rate of exchange, about £25. Needless to say, the greater part of this sum was derived from taxes and rents.

Sultan bin Saqr wore a perfumed robe of embroidered linen,

On hot evenings Hassan would provide me with a silk *kufieyh*, or Arab gown—which I wore in place of my jacket and shirt; this is a loose, cool garment, ideal for desert conditions and climate. We would sit in rattan chairs on the roof overlooking the sea, sipping the delicious clove-flavoured coffee and discussing philosophy, belles-lettres, or the humanities. Because of his wide reading and understanding, Hassan could see life from the European as well as from the Arab point of view, and his interpretations of Arab mentality and character helped me considerably to understand his people.

Most of the Arab tribes in south-east Arabia are extremely strict in their interpretation of the Koran but, as with the followers of other religions, there are exceptions to this rule. Many who profess and call themselves good Moslems are extremely unorthodox in practice. The fast of Ramadan is, without exception, vigilantly observed by all Mohammedans, but a great many Arabs, especially those of the merchant class, fail to observe the stern tenets of the Prophet. Prayers are dutifully said at the prescribed hours, especially at sunset, when the faithful perform their genuflections and prostrations with religious zeal. But the middle and upper classes are rather liberal in their religious ideas. It is not uncommon for an Arab to smoke, even in public. The younger men prefer Turkish or Egyptian cigarettes, although most of the native shops in Sharjah and Dubai were well stocked with 'Lucky Strike', 'Camels' and 'Players', the source of these supplies being traceable to the U.S. and the R.A.F. canteens. The troops had no scruples about selling their rations for cash.

The older men would smoke native-grown tobacco in tiny pipes scarcely bigger than an acorn cup. After a few short puffs the brittle leaf would crumble into ashes, but they seemed to derive such pleasure from these brief smokes, perhaps because the leaf was tinctured with hashish. After use the pipe is placed in a small sheepskin pouch, which the Arabs carry about in the folds of their *abbas*, or gowns. The hubble-bubble is a Turkish innovation, used largely by the Persians and Parsees, and a crude form of this pipe is manufactured in Oman and sold in the bazaars.

The Arab seldom touches alcohol, and it is an offence to distil, import or drink it in Sharjah territory. Nevertheless, a certain amount of bad Indian gin is brought in by the ships, and arrack is certainly distilled by the Indians in secret. I have never seen an Arab in these parts drink spirits, although an American officer once